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Intertwined

Our Happiness Is Tied to God's Glory

By Mark Ballenger

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They will be my people, and I will be their God. And I will give them one heart and one purpose: to worship me forever, for their own good and for the good of all their descendants.

And I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good for them. I will put a desire in their hearts to worship me, and they will never leave me. I will find joy doing good for them and will faithfully and wholeheartedly replant them in this land.

-Jeremiah 32:38-41(NLT)

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The Ultimate Trump Card to Unhappiness

Even suffering will be easier when we are with Him, but without Him, even the greatest pleasures will be joyless. - Brother Lawrence¹

I said to the Lord, “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.” -Psalm 16:2

“Man!” I blurted out with huff of self-centeredness. We had just gotten done taking our dog out and I was in rush to get back home so I could make it to my next appointment. Living in Cleveland, Ohio, one of the cloudiest and rainiest cities in America, we were trying to take advantage of the rare tolerable weather in the winter months.

But when I was trying to turn left onto my street to get home, much to my chagrin the guy opposite me in the oncoming lane was also trying to turn left. My annoyance meter was rising as we both passively sat staring at one another, wondering if it was clear in the far right lane for us to turn. “This guy is in my way. He’s totally blocking my view!”

Bethany, my wife, while filing her nails quietly said in a non-judgmental, factual tone, “He’s probably saying the same thing about you.”

Bingo. She was totally right. Sitting there, mindlessly attending to the beauty of her finger tips, Bethany had just solved the great mystery of my chronic road rage. My problems stem from my belief that I am the most important person on planet earth. So when someone is blocking my view while I am also blocking his, clearly he is at fault. When I'm late, clearly everyone else is driving too slow and deserves my classic Ballenger-death-stare as I pass them. However, when I have time to kill and feel like practicing my *American Idol* skills to some tunes on the radio, other people are obviously being rude as they speed by giving me their own death-stares. "Jeeze, look at all these speeding sinners," I say to myself in between lyrics. "Why are they rushing me?"

When I realize I am not the center of my own universe, but God is, my anger stemming from self-centeredness is solved. So I am going to be late, is that really what God cares about? Why should I sin against God by losing control of myself because I fear the wrath of my earthly boss if I'm late to work? Did God make me so I could be on time to places or did he make me to glorify him in every situation, even if I'm running late? (Note to all bosses: Obviously God wants us to be on time so we can be good workers. This is not me saying it's okay to be late. It's just an example of solving anger through putting God's glory first. Please, no mean emails.)

Or take my friend Mike for example. Mike has a less than desirable work situation. He is grateful to have a job, but the mundane tasks of his position can be truly grueling. Mike,

however, has committed to not being a complainer but rather has embraced his current work situation as an opportunity to honor God by making him his ultimate treasure even when life's circumstances are less than desirable. Mike explains that when he realized his purpose in life was not to have the most amazing job ever but to serve God and enjoy him in every situation he finds himself in, then his work situation suddenly became something much more than mundane. It became the highest calling anyone could ever have – to work in the service of the King. Mike's internal happiness is no longer governed by his external circumstance.

If I were to follow modern wisdom in writing Christian books, this chapter would have come before the previous chapter. That would have been a safer time to hook my readers with how this book will personally benefit them, thus causing them to read further. And I don't believe that would not have been wrong. What's the point of reading a book that doesn't help?

However, for me to have begun explaining how glorifying God benefits you (and it does!) before explaining the truth that God is first and foremost for himself, I would be reinforcing the very mindset that enslaves us and steals our joy in God to begin with. The cure to every discontentment is to live for nothing but the glory of God. When we put our needs and wants (apart from a desire for God) at the center of our pursuits, we are already on the wrong road. Therefore it would not have been helpful to begin you down a road

seeking your best life before first explaining the centrality of God's glory.

Every longing is instantly met in our souls when we embrace the truth that God is for God and he made us to center around him in everything we do. When we live as though we are the point, life becomes a fight to prove to everyone, including God, how selfish they are being by not revolving all their time and energies around us. Discontentment simply disappears when we embrace the truth that we are not the point. God is the point, and this is the starting line of the journey to freedom.

Our Joy Is at Stake in Our Decision to Live for Christ's Sake

If anyone knew something about unfavorable external circumstances, it was the Apostle Paul:

“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have

known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.” (2 Corinthians 11:25-28)

If anyone had reason to despair and be discontent with life, certainly Paul was this man. However, in just the very next chapter after the above verses and after he describes the weakness he feels because of a thorn in his flesh, Paul wrote something totally profound:

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take [the thorn in my flesh] away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, *for Christ’s sake*, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:8-10, emphasis mine)

Why was Paul able to live with joy and to even delight in weaknesses, in insults, in persecutions, and in difficulties? God did not answer his prayer the way he had originally hoped. God didn’t take away the thorn; he didn’t change Paul’s external circumstances. Instead of taking Paul out of a

difficult trial, God used this thorn to teach Paul that happiness in life will not come through outer pleasures but through finding total joy in the sufficient grace and power of Jesus Christ.

Paul was able to find his delight even though God did not remove the bothersome thorn because he was given a new perspective to view his weaknesses as an opportunity for God to glorify himself through these weaknesses. Paul now realized he was to endure all this suffering “for Christ’s sake.” Because his new aim was to honor Christ and not himself, he was now able to find great joy even in personal trials. In 2 Corinthians 4:8-11 he states this truth again:

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death *for Jesus’ sake*, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.”

When I live not for my own sake but “for Jesus’ sake,” then I truly find my life (Matthew 16:25). Realizing God’s pleasure in me is more important than my external circumstances frees me from being controlled by life’s ever changing challenges. All of our sins and unhappiness are merely symptoms of the

real problem – putting ourselves before God. Solve the root issue and all the symptoms go away as well.

People commit adultery, steal, lie, become angry, avoid confrontation, and sin in every way imaginable simply because we have chosen to live as though we are most important, not God. As Paul explains in 1 Thessalonians 2:4 (ESV), “But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.”

When God is valued above all else, every discontentment is destroyed.

Pleasure Is Produced Through Fulfilling Your Purpose

Some of you may have noticed that I’m basically just using different words to describe the verses many of us have heard hundreds of times, “If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it” (Matthew 10:39 NLT). “In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:6). “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

The Bible teaches this truth over and over again: If you put you at the center, life is going to be rather miserable. But if you place God at the center through the power he gives you in Jesus, you will be full of immense joy.

Our satisfaction must be rooted and established in God alone. Sure we can find pleasure in his gifts, but ultimately he should receive the praise even for these. Our internal happiness cannot be sustained by our external circumstances. This isn't to say God will never lead us to switch jobs, get marriage counseling, lose weight, find a different church, or buy a new house. God will lead us to make thousands of changes in our outer worlds as our lives progress with him. But these changes alone will not bring us ultimate joy. Outer circumstance will never be perfect in this age because we live in a fallen world, thus outer circumstances cannot be our primary well of happiness.

Never was this clearer to me than when I had first become a pastor. The job I had while working through seminary was awful. I worked in the basement of a hospital cleaning bloody surgical instruments so they could be sterilized and used again in the operating room. To protect ourselves while decontaminating soiled equipment, we had to wear really uncomfortable protective clothing that did not breathe well at all. The environment was dark, loud because of the cleaning equipment, and the attitude of my coworkers was usually very poor. For eight hours a day I was stuck in what felt like an abyss of boredom, sweat, and other people's blood.

But God was working on me during that time. He was having me recite Scripture in my mind while I cleaned, he had me praying through the long hours of working in solitude, and he was teaching me what it meant to be "content in any and

every circumstance” (Philippians 4:12). I can honestly say that despite the dungeon my work environment was, I had many days of joy in Christ there.

Nonetheless, when I was finally hired as a pastor, I was elated. Finally I could provide for my family while also doing work that I enjoyed. What could go wrong? I was working with other Christians, some of whom I had been good friends with for a long time. I was helping people, leading small groups, doing administrative work most Christians would give their right arm to do if they could escape their work place – and yet within just a few months I was seriously considering going back to work at the hospital.

As awesome as it is to work as a pastor, it is still work. For every 50 people that appreciate you, respect you, and are a genuine joy to serve, there is at least one who is the exact opposite. If thirty-five hours a week are spent doing things you enjoy and are good at, there is at least five hours of tasks you are not gifted in and you feel like a failure after doing them. And of course human nature causes us to dwell on the negative, no matter how much good there is too.

As a young, new pastor, I found myself extremely burdened and stressed. But now that I was no longer at the hospital, instead of knowing I had no chance at contentment in the awful circumstance of my job, I felt that since I was now at a church I should be happy since most of my work was not

overly burdensome. My good circumstances were tempting me to place my joy in circumstances and not in Christ.

What I learned through this was that I would be happier cleaning blood and guts off surgical instruments if I was finding joy in Christ than if I was not finding joy in Christ but working in a ministry job. Through two very different work experiences, God was driving home the point that no matter what you have in the world to make yourself happy, it isn't going to work. The richest of all men can be miserable, while the poorest of all souls can have amazing joy. All of it depends on understanding and living out the intertwined truth that we are here for God's glory and glorifying God is our good.

Therefore, like Paul, we have the ultimate trump card for whatever troubles may come our way in the phrase "for Christ sake." For Christ sake, I can endure this difficult job. For Christ sake, I can do this work in the church. For Christ sake, I can move on from any ministry when the Lord makes it clear. For Christ sake, I can forgive this wrong. For Christ sake, I can love my spouse in marital trials. For Christ sake, I can accept love from my spouse even when I don't feel I deserve it. For Christ sake, I can raise my kids when they are being ungrateful. For Christ sake, I can seek to please God as a single person. For Christ sake, I can resist this temptation. For Christ sake, I can forgive myself. For Christ sake, I can do his will even when it hurts. "For Christ sake" truly is the ultimate trump card for all of our life's difficulties.

To base your joy in God and not in this world is to no longer be controlled by the uncontrollable ups and downs of a fallen planet. When I accept that the level of my joy is always equivalent to the level of my active love, intimacy, and glorification of God, the conundrum of a joyless life is totally eradicated. This is always true because it's the way God made it. God designed us with his praise as our purpose (Isaiah 43:7). C.S. Lewis explains it this way in *Mere Christianity*:

“God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol (gas), and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”²

If you were to fill a car with coffee instead of gas, it wouldn't work. Likewise, when we fill ourselves with earthly pleasures instead of a deep relationship with God, our lives just don't work. He designed us to only be truly happy when we are placing him and his glory first and foremost in our lives.

Even if our outer circumstances are all we dreamed they would be, if God is not being actively enjoyed in our lives through an intimate relationship with him, our internal happiness is still not realized. Out of love God made us for himself because he knew he is the best. He loves us too much to allow us to settle for anything but the best.

We are all sinners from birth (Psalm 51:5), so of course the ways we seek satisfaction have been corrupted. So I don't believe everyone desires to live a godly life. But I do believe every unmet longing in our hearts are actually desires for a life lived for God. Even though most of us try to fill the hole with godless things, in our search for happiness we are all actually searching for him because only he can provide true satisfaction. We keep drinking down mud when what we were made to drink is the purest water available. Is it any wonder why we hurt on the inside?

Since God cares so much about his own glory and our good, he will literally work against our happiness when we are not placing him first in our hearts. God is an all or nothing God. He doesn't want you "sort of happy." He wants you to be fully joyful for eternity. Therefore he wants you to want him because only he brings maximum joy. He doesn't want us drinking less muddy water. He doesn't want us to drink it all; so he keeps allowing us to get sick until we start drinking only what we were made for.

God desires good for me and what is good for me is to glorify God. “This is what the LORD says— your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. . . . There is no peace,’ says the LORD, ‘for the wicked’” (Isaiah 48:17,22). God wants us full of joy and he is trying to tell us that what is going to fill us with the most joy is him. Therefore, the wicked, because the pleasure of God is not their highest aim, have no peace. As Augustine prayed, “You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace till they rest in you.”³

You can plug a toaster into an outlet and it will work. Or you can plug it into something else and it will sit useless, never toasting anything. These are the only two options. Likewise, you can’t go against God’s design and it work out well. You can either embrace your purpose to magnify God and find supreme joy in him, or you can erase your purpose of exalting God and receive the misery of a wasted life. God is a rock. He can either be our firm foundation and our protection, or we can be dashed against him. But he is not moving on this one. He will either make us happy when we are fully his or miserable if we refuse him.

Whether we embrace this truth or not, it is the truth. Isaiah 26:8-9 states, “. . . your name and renown are the desire of our hearts. My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you.” We may try to satisfy this desire with other things, which is sin, but our longing for joy

will only be satisfied when we make his name and renown the purpose of our existence.

David cried out, “I love the house where you live, O Lord, the place where your glory dwells” (Psalm 26:8). “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:1-2). David knew his desire was a desire only God could quench.

In Psalm 37:4, one of the most quoted verses in the Bible, it reads, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.” I would argue this is true because the deepest desire of our hearts is to delight in the Lord. When I delight in God my heart’s desire, which is to delight in God, is satisfied. I don’t believe this verse means because I delight in God I get the external circumstances I think will make me happy (i.e. the newest technology, the best fashion, marriage, kids, and suburban bliss). Rather because I delight in God my happiness is found because my deepest longing, because God put it there, is to be happy in God.

Sin has corrupted our ability to truly delight in God, therefore we are in need of grace to correct our inability to find satisfaction in him. However, for sinner and saved alike, until we place God at the head of our existence in everything we do through the grace of Christ, the deep desires of our hearts will never be met. When we drink the world’s muddy water it just makes us more thirsty, making us drink more and more,

progressively sinning in greater and greater shameful ways; but anyone who tastes the living water will never be thirsty again (John 4:13-14).

Therefore, pursuing our best is equivalent to pursuing God.

Back to Center

Up to this point we have discovered God places himself above all things. God is first and foremost for God. His glory is his supreme concern. We have also discovered, however, that God truly does want the best for us. Since he is the best, he makes us for him. To clarify, we have two facts:

1. God is for his glory (Chapter 2).
2. God desires the best for us, which is to glorify him (Chapter 3).

With these two truths, we can discover a third. Since God cares most about his glory and he also desire what is best for us, we can conclude God glorifies himself through doing good for us. If we don't embrace this third fact, there is the temptation to lose focus. Even in our good, God's true agenda is the glorification of himself. This does not taint the authentic good he does. Rather, embracing this truth protects us from making ourselves the center and thus losing the joy that stems from living out our design of magnifying the King. This is now what we have:

1. God is for his glory (Chapter 2).

2. God desires the best for us, which is to glorify him (Chapter 3).
3. Therefore, God must be glorified through our good (Chapter 4).

God desires and orchestrates good for our lives not because we deserve it but because this honors him. He has a vested interest in creating immense good in us, through us, and for us, ultimately for his glory. Our good alone is not the point. To his praise, though, God is glorified through expressing his love to others. His glory and our good are eternally intertwined by his design because of his love.

Our Mess Can Be His Miracle

It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply. -A.W. Tozer¹

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. -2 Corinthians 4:17

Everything changed for me when I was in the fourth grade. I remember my mom had picked up my sister and me from school as she normally did. As we drove home, she seemed a little quieter than normal, but we really didn't think much of it at the time. When we walked into the house, she immediately told us to sit down on the couch because she had something to tell us.

Subconsciously I knew this wasn't one of those talks we got for doing something wrong. Her voice had a different tone to it than when she gave us her motherly lectures I had heard so many times before. Nevertheless, I started to feel that sinking sensation in my stomach I used to get when I would forget to do that big project my teacher had been telling me about for months.

“You're dad is in the hospital. He's had a massive stroke.” As soon as she said the words, she burst into tears. I had no idea what a stroke meant, but from the immediate horror that came

over my older sister and from the sobs of my mom over her divorced husband, I knew it had to be serious.

As the coming days went by, vivid memories burned into my mind. I remember walking to the Intensive Care Unit for the first time and seeing my dad lying lifelessly in bed, mumbling incoherently from time to time. I remember being upset over the little things the hospital staff was doing to him, like how they would only allow him to hydrate through an IV and wet his mouth a few times a day through sponges and ice chips. They explained they were doing this so he wouldn't have anything to vomit and possibly choke on, but I didn't care as boy. Things that seemed cruel but that were actually for my dad's good still just seemed cruel through my young eyes.

Staring out the glass window dividing the hallway and the waiting room, I saw them rush him to the operating room to perform emergency surgery the doctor warned had a high chance of failure. They took half of his skull out to make room for his swelling brain, and to the amazement of the hospital staff, it worked.

When I came to visit after school a few days later, my dad was sitting up in bed with family and friends smiling around him. But my joy turned to confusion once I looked closer at him. He was no longer the dad I once knew. Due to the brain damage everything changed for him. Physically, emotionally,

mentally, and even relationally – it was all difficult and different now.

To a young boy who had idolized his dad as Superman, my dad's wounds were now my wounds. If the rock of our family could go down, what is really stable in this world? What isn't at risk? Through the years, we all began to realize, my dad included, that who he was before the stroke was no more. The "old dad" had died. As the years went by, my new dad would prove just as loving and supportive as the other. But I would be lying if I said this incident didn't shape nearly my entire outlook on life and God in the years to follow.

Sunday school and religion class at the Christian academy I attended had drilled into my mind that God was good and loving. But why did this happen then? Why did God allow me so much pain as a child? Couldn't God have taught me the lessons I learned through this in a less hurtful way? Did he cause this to happen or did he merely allow it?

Years later and now with a wealth of experience proving God's faithfulness, I'm still not sure I have answers to all of these questions. Perhaps what I have learned is that these are the wrong questions to be asking.

Only God Defines Our Good

In the last chapter we learned that God is good all the time. However, when we look at our external lives, this doesn't always seem to be clear to us. If God is good all the time,

why did you just lose your job? Why did my dad have a massive stroke when I needed him most? Why is your marriage falling apart? Why do parents get divorced? Why do you have to sit in traffic every day? Why are there so many annoying problems in the world, like traffic? And why is life just so dang difficult?

I think the answer lies in our definition of “good.” When I have been writing that “God is glorified through our good,” I don’t mean he is glorified through our various definitions of what each one of us consider good. You may consider it good to be rich and famous; I may want to live in a hole with no one to bother me, yelling at the neighbor kids who run on my grass outside my hole.

We cannot use our personalized definitions of “good.” If we do, we will always doubt God’s heart for us because we will constantly be interpreting life’s difficult circumstances as God’s lack of love. We must use his definition of what is “good” for us. And his definition has less to do with our outer circumstances and more to do with our inner transformation and ability to honor him.

God being glorified through our good does not mean I should expect him to be my personal genie. C.S. Lewis explains, “Love is not affectionate feelings, but a steady wish for the loved person’s ultimate good as far as it can be obtained.”² God knows the best thing for me is to worship him; therefore,

he will constantly be working and arranging my life so this happens, no matter the short-term consequences.

So what is our ultimate “good?” Our good is it to glorify God and to enjoy his supreme glory in everything. It can come from life or death, but God will allow whatever circumstance he needs for his name to be most magnified in our lives. We may not always understand his grand plan on this side of eternity, but we can trust everything he does will benefit us because everything he does is meant to glorify him.

Without a Death Their Can't Be a Resurrection

Our pain is our gain when grace is applied because it is God's opportunity to display his power in our lives. Never in the Bible is there a miracle without a mess. Jesus never heals anyone who isn't first sick. He never quiets calm waters. He never produces food for people who already have enough. God always displays his glory in a miraculous way by first allowing a massive problem to arise. He doesn't do miracles for entertainment purposes or to produce tingles on our necks. His purpose is always to display the power of Jesus to save.

God loves us so much that he allows short-term pain in our lives to display his glory which then produces long-term joy. I think this is what Jesus was trying to teach us through the raising of Lazarus:

³ So the sisters [Mary and Martha] sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. (John 11:3-6)

To most of us, the phrase “the one you love is sick” seems like an oxymoron. If Jesus loves Lazarus, why the heck is he sick? We naturally associate easy external circumstances with God’s pleasure towards us and hard external circumstances with God’s displeasure towards us.

Christians often view God like I viewed the hospital staff as a little child. I couldn’t see that the short-term displeasure the doctors and nurses were causing my dad with their treatments was actually meant for his long-term good. As a young boy I thought they were just mean because I could not see the bigger picture. Not until years later when I was grown and enjoying the company of my dad did I begin to realize what seemed like cruelty was actually done to save his life. God often treats us the same way. He will do whatever it takes to save us from death, even if it means sacrificing our short-term comforts (Hebrews 12:6).

Likewise, Jesus allowed Lazarus to be sick *because* he loved him. Notice in verse 5 it clearly states Jesus loved the sisters and Lazarus. Then verse 6 explains with extreme clarity (notice the word “So”) how Jesus expresses that love. He

purposely waits two more days so that Lazarus dies. Jesus shows his love not by keeping them from pain, but by allowing pain so he could use it to magnify himself in their lives. Jesus knew it was better for them that they experience his greatness and know he is God rather than to spare them of short-term displeasures. He knew if he didn't allow a death in the family, he would never have a chance to produce a resurrection.

Jesus knew the darker the situation got, the brighter his glory would shine for those he sought to express his affection. He didn't just want them to love him with an average love. He wanted to produce in them a deeper awe of his greatness than they had ever known. Because Jesus did not spare them of short-term difficulties, they gained a lavish love for Jesus they wouldn't have otherwise had.

In John 12 we see the family throwing a party for Jesus. Mary takes out the rare perfume worth a year's wages and pours it on Jesus feet and then wipes his feet with her hair. Mary is the one who performs this act of love, but I bet the whole family was in it on it. No one in the family objected, and Martha was not shy about voicing her complaints (Luke 10:40). Mary, Martha, and Lazarus I'm sure were all overjoyed to spill a year's wages on the feet of Jesus. But I wonder if they would have been so lavish if they hadn't just witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in John 11?

I think this is what Jesus is trying to do all the time. He allows messes to form in our lives so he has an opportunity to produce miracles. He doesn't just want our average love; he

wants lavish love like Mary showed. This type of love in us can only be produced when we allow Jesus to finish what he started.

It would have been really simple for everyone to start doubting Jesus once Lazarus died. Jesus said in John 11:4, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory, so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” If I were there, I would have assumed this meant Lazarus was *not* going to die. But that’s not what Jesus said. He said this tragedy will not “end” in death. He didn’t say Lazarus wasn’t going to experience death. How often do we mistake the promises of God in similar ways?

The easy thing to do would have been to throw their hands up and gripe at Jesus. The hard thing, the thing that eventually produced immense joy in them, was to trust that even though life wasn’t working out the way they thought it should, Jesus can turn any death into a resurrection if we allow him to finish what he intended from the start.

Don’t Stop the Artist Halfway Through His Masterpiece

Jesus was the only one in this story who knew the end result. He had a plan from the beginning of what he wanted to do. He didn’t forget to set his alarm clock and accidentally allowed Lazarus to die. He didn’t get stuck in the morning rush hour commute on his way to the city of Bethany where Lazarus lived. It wasn’t as though Jesus didn’t care enough to save Lazarus but then raised him from the dead because he felt bad after seeing everyone crying. Jesus had a plan, but the people had to stick around long enough to allow him to finish what he started in order to witness his faithfulness.

So often when we hear that God is faithful, we assume his faithfulness will translate into an easy and clean life. When we experience a job loss, a church split, a health scare, a divorce, or some disappointment in life, we naturally assume God is not as loving as we hoped. But God never promised we wouldn't die if we trust him. He just said that our stories would not end in death. The business may have failed, but it doesn't mean God isn't faithful. The marriage may have been terminated, but that doesn't mean God doesn't care.

Life becomes so much simpler to see God's love when situations are not seen as ultimate failures or successes until God receives praise through them. God can only turn bad into good in our lives when we allow him the time to work long after we feel something or someone has died.

Before my wife and I had kids and we had time to spend some of our summer Saturday afternoons lounging in front of the TV, on occasion we would find ourselves watching the painter Bob Ross. If I'm being honest, after flipping through the few stations our antenna actually picked up, we were often forced to watch him due to nothing else being on.

Bob Ross's show is basically him starting with a blank canvass and then he walks his viewers through creating a beautiful painting. His red afro, quirky mannerisms, and bellbottom pants draw you in like a moth to the fire. You're not sure how it happens, but somehow you find yourself hooked on watching him paint and talk about making "happy little trees" and "joyful little mountains."

Although Bob Ross certainly seems to have enjoyed the 60's a little too much (if you know what I mean), the guy is an

amazing painter. My favorite part of the show comes about three-quarters of the way in. The blank canvass is no longer blank. It holds a masterpiece of exquisite trees with sunrays glistening off shimmering lakes nestled in the foothills of grand mountains in the background. The painting seems perfect just the way it is.

Then it happens. Without fail, right when you think Bob Ross is going to tell you to tune in next week for another odd but entertaining experience of watching him paint, he gets out the thick brush, dabs it in some dark color, and generously adds it to the canvas, seemingly ruining the masterpiece that should have been.

My mouth drops, Bethany and I complain that he just ruined it, and I start getting nervous for him because the show is nearing its end. I'm always waiting for him to get flustered, breakdown in panic, and admit he just totally jacked-up his painting and will now have to start over next week. But it never happens that way.

He then goes for the little brush and calmly dabs together a mixture of whites, blues, and greens. He then adds this new mixture of color to the dark splotch I feel has ruined the whole painting. He adds some sun rays and flowers and a few bushes. After about five minutes, the dark blob of paint is no longer a dark blob of paint but rather a colorful, twisting oak tree or a beautiful log cabin or whatever Bob Ross felt like making that week. What I thought was going to be a blemish is now the finishing touch. It completes the whole work of art. Without it, I can see the painting would have been average at best. Now it is truly a masterpiece.

But what would have happened if Bob Ross wasn't allowed to finish what he started? What if he was painting, added the splotch, and then someone told him to take a hike because he just ruined the whole thing? What could have been a masterpiece is now an average painting that is ruined and tossed into the dumpster.

That's what it's like when we turn from God in the middle of him working to glorify himself in our lives. The master artist needs to be allowed to finish his work. What we feel is going to be a blemish, God wants to make as his finishing touch.

Jesus told his disciples that Lazarus's sickness would not "end" in death. But then Lazarus dies, the splotch of dark paint is generously applied, and it seems the hope of a happy ending is lost. Maybe Jesus messed up? Maybe God really doesn't love Lazarus? As the disciples wonder what is going on, Jesus says to them, ". . . for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe" (John 11:15).

Jesus then raises Lazarus from the dead, Lazarus and the sisters love him like never before, and the display of God's power causes many people to put their faith in Jesus (John 11:43). As Lazarus was coming out of the tomb in his grave clothes, I imagine Jesus turning around and looking at his speechless disciples. His eyes surely said it all, "Do you believe who I am yet?"

Storms Are Meant to Reveal Who Jesus Is

The disciples were constantly viewing life through their own personalized definitions of "good." When they were walking with Jesus and saw a blind man, they asked, "Rabbi, who

sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). They assumed because the man had a difficult circumstance to deal with, God must be punishing him.

Like a baseball bat to a mirror, Jesus shatters their understanding of God’s love when he states, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life” (John 9:3). God shows his love for us by displaying his power in our lives, not by always creating pampered life experiences. God allowed the man to be born blind so that God could use his blindness to display his glory. In love, not in hate, did God let the man be born with a disability.

When Jesus sent the disciples into the storm, he was trying to teach them this very thing. In Mark 4 we have Jesus directing the disciples into the boat, telling them to sail across the lake to the other side:

³⁷ A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.

³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

³⁹ He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other,
“Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey
him!”

Let's get our facts straight here. Jesus is the one who sends them into the storm (verse 35), Jesus is in the boat when the squall almost sinks them (verse 37), but he waits to save the disciples until they call out to him (verse 39). It must have been confusing for them to be in a near death experience Jesus brought them into with him right in the boat by their side.

If Jesus wasn't there, perhaps the storm would have made more sense to them. “I told you, Peter,” Thomas might say, “we should never have tried to cross this lake without Jesus. You know he brings us good luck.” But their good luck charm was right in the boat with them. Perhaps Jesus allows the boat to almost sink to teach the disciples that just because he is with them, it doesn't mean hard times are not ahead. Jesus allows the storm for a greater purpose. He forgoes their immediate comfort and allows them to almost drown not because he doesn't love them, but because he desires to show how great and powerful his love really is.

Jesus wasn't upset that the disciples woke him up. He was upset that they were afraid. He didn't say, “Why did you disturb me? Do you know how long it's been since I've gotten some solid sleep?” All he said was, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (verse 40). Clearly Jesus is upset because they doubted him. They didn't wake Jesus up saying, “Jesus, there is a storm upon us and we know you are the only one who can save us.” Instead they woke him up

with panic stricken faces and yelled in fear, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (verse 38).

When Jesus questions their faith, I believe he is questioning their faith in his love for them as their Savior. Faith in God’s power and love squashes all fear. I think Jesus was saying, “I know you don’t have any idea of how much I love you or of how much power I hold, and you just proved it by doubting me. I didn’t bring you into this storm because I don’t love you. I brought you into this storm to show the power of my love for you.” Jesus knew the disciples would never ask the question, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (verse 41) if they didn’t witness the power of Jesus in the middle of a storm.

Rather than spare them the immediate danger of almost drowning, he lets them endure the fear of death so that they might begin to understand that Jesus alone brings life. It was good for the disciples to almost drown because they learned Jesus has the power to save and is worthy of all adoration. Perhaps the point of the storm was not only to test the disciples’ faith, it was to prove and display the faithfulness of God.

Since the disciples didn’t get it this first time, in Matthew 14 Jesus sends them into another storm, but this time he is not with them. Seeing them struggle, he allows the storm to get really bad, and then he goes out to them by walking on the water. The disciples doubt it’s Jesus, so Peter asks to walk on the water to Jesus to prove if it’s really him. Jesus tells Peter to come, Peter walks on the water, doubts and begins to sink, but then Jesus rescues him. Once Jesus and Peter step into the

boat it states, “. . . the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’” (Matthew 14:32-33).

In both storms, Jesus had to let the disciples get completely terrified before they would call out to him. But as soon as they gave Jesus the opportunity to glorify himself in their trouble, Jesus stopped the storm and gave them great peace and joy. The point of the storms in our lives is always the same. God wants to glorify himself by revealing Jesus is the great Savior. He wants us to first call into question, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41). And then he wants us to answer, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:32).

Often times the faster we call out and allow God the opportunity to be praised, the faster he stops the storm. Maybe God will remove you from that job you despise when you start worshipping him in it. Maybe he will begin to grow your church when you honor God with the few people he has given you. Maybe the marriage will improve when you give God your whole heart even in its dysfunction. God isn't mean, he just knows the best thing for us is to learn to glorify him.

It's not as though Jesus is compassionless for us in our difficulties. Jesus wept over the death of Lazarus (John 11:35) and Jesus immediately stopped the storm as soon as the disciples asked him to (Mark 4:39). But Jesus, in love, is always willing to allow short-term discomfort if his splendor can shine and produce eternal transformation and joy. Jesus

knows if we want to walk on water, we need storms to call out to him during.

(If you enjoyed these two sample chapters, the full book can be found by [clicking here.](#))